William Law (1686-1761)

"Devotion is neither public nor private prayer. Prayers, whether public or private, are particular parts or instances of devotion." These definitions begin William Law's documentation of his rules of spiritual discipline called, A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life. Published in 1728, this book as well as his earlier book, Christian Perfection, had immense influence on John and Charles Wesley. Law was committed to showing how the Christian may increase Christian virtues.

Law was a contemporary of Newton , Locke and Woolman. In 1705, he entered Emmanuel College , Cambridge , and became a fellow in 1711. He planned to enter the priesthood of the Church of England, but in 1714, at the death of Queen Anne, he became a non-Juror: that is to say, he found himself unable to take the required oath of allegiance to the Hanoverian dynasty (who had replaced the Stuart dynasty) as the lawful rulers of the United Kingdom, and was accordingly ineligible to serve as a university teacher or parish minister.

He became a private tutor for ten years in the family of the historian, Edward Gibbon (who, despite his generally cynical attitude toward all things Christian, invariably wrote of Law with respect and admiration), and then retired to his native King's Cliffe. Forbidden the use of the pulpit and the lecture-hall, he preached through his books. These include: Christian Perfection, The Grounds and Reasons of Christian Regeneration, Spirit of Prayer, The Way to Divine Knowledge, Spirit of Love, and, best-known of all, A Serious Call To a Devout and Holy Life. The thesis of this last book is that God does not merely forgive our disobedience, he calls us to obedience, and to a life completely centered in Him. He says: *"If you will here stop and ask yourself why you are not as pious as the primitive Christians were, your own heart will tell you that it is neither through ignorance nor inability, but because you never thoroughly intended it."*

The immediate influence of the book was considerable.

Dr. Samuel Johnson said (Boswell's Life of Johnson, ch. 1): *"I became a sort of lax talker against religion, for I did not think much against it; and this lasted until I went to Oxford , where it would not be suffered. When at Oxford , I took up Law's Serious Call, expecting to find it a dull book (as such books generally are), and perhaps to laugh at it. But I found Law quite an overmatch for me; and this was the first occasion of my thinking in earnest of religion after I became capable of rational inquiry."*

Gibbon (as mentioned above) said: *"If Mr. Law finds a spark of piety in a reader's mind, he will soon kindle it into a flame."*

John Wesley calls it one of three books which accounted for his *first "explicit resolve to be all devoted to God."* Later, when denying, in response to a question, that Methodism was founded on Law's writings, he added *that "Methodists carefully read these books and were greatly profitted by them."* In 1744 he published extracts from the Serious Call, thereby introducing it to a wider audience than it already had. About eighteen months before his death, he called it *"a treatise which will hardly be excelled, if it be equalled, either for beauty of expression or for depth of thought."*

Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, Henry Venn, William Wilberforce, and Thomas Scott each described reading the book as a major turning-point in his life. All in all, there were few leaders of the English Evangelical movement on whom it did not have a profound influence.

Some Christians have considered Law's work inadequate, as not sufficiently concerned with Justification by Faith, to which objection Law would doubtless have replied: "But I never offered it as a complete presentation of the Gospel, only as a reminder of the words, 'Go and sin no more,' which are surely a part of the Gospel."

Law was known to rise each morning at 5 a.m. and spend time in devotions before breakfast and studying. At 9 a.m. he joined his family in devotion, at which time the Collects and Psalms for the day were offered. For the remainder of the day, he retired to his study to write meditations and to see to the needs of the community. He also devoted himself to the writing of mystical devotional works.

Andrew Murray said of Law's *Affectionate and Earnest Address to the Clergy:*

"I do not know where to find anywhere else the same clear and powerful statement of the truth which the Church needs at the present day. I have tried to read or consult every book I knew of, that treats of the work of the Holy Spirit, and nowhere have I met with anything that brings the truth of our dependence on the continual leading of the Spirit, and the assurance that that leading can be enjoyed without interruption, so home to the heart as this teaching ...which I believe to be entirely scriptural..."

Here is an excerpt from Law's book, Affectionate and Earnest Address to the Clergy , which beautifully expresses his believe in universal reconciliation.

[Addr-191] *Love, goodness, and communication of good, is the immutable glory and perfection of the divine nature, and nothing can have union with God, but that which partakes of this goodness. The love that brought forth the existence of all things, changes not through the fall of its creatures, but is continually at work, to bring back all fallen nature and creature to their first state of goodness. All that passes for a time between God and his fallen creature, is but one and*
[Addr-191] *Love, goodness, and communication of good, is the immutable glory and perfection of the divine nature, and nothing can have union with God, but that which partakes of this goodness. The love that brought forth the existence of all things, changes not through the fall of its creatures, but is continually at work, to bring back all fallen nature and creature to their first state of goodness. All that passes for a time between God and his fallen creature, is but one and*
the same thing, working for one and the same end; and though this is called wrath, that called punishment, curse, and death, it is all from the beginning to the end, nothing but the work of the first creating love, and means nothing else, does nothing else, but those works of purifying fire, which must, and alone can burn away all that dark evil, which separates the creature from its first created union with God. God's providence, from the fall to the restitution of all things, is doing the same thing, as when he said to the dark chaos of fallen nature, "Let there be light"; he still says, and will continue saying the same thing, till there is no evil of darkness left in all that is nature and creature. God creating, God illuminating, God sanctifying, God threatening and punishing, God forgiving and redeeming, is but one and the same essential, immutable, never ceasing working of the divine nature. That in God which illuminates and glorifies saints and angels in heaven, is that very same working of the divine nature, which wounds, pains, punishes, and purifies sinners upon earth. And (N.B.) every number of destroyed sinners, whether thrown by Noah's flood, or Sodom's brimstone, into the terrible furnace of a life, insensible of anything but new forms of raging misery till judgment's day, must through the all -working, all- redeeming love of God, which never ceases, come at last to know that they had lost, and have found again such a God of love as this.

[Addr-192] *And if long and long ages of fiery pain, and tormenting darkness, fall to the share of many, or most of God's apostate creatures, they will last no longer, than till the great fire of God has melted all arrogance into humility, and all that is SELF has died in the long agonies and bloody sweat of a lost God, which is that all-saving cross of Christ, which will never give up its redeeming power, till sin and sinners have no more a name among the creatures of God.*

Listing of works by William Law:

A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life (1729)
A Demonstration of the Gross and Fundamental Errors of a late Book called a Plain Account, etc., of the Lord's Supper (1737)
The Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Regeneration (1731)
Appeal to all that Doubt and Disbelieve the Truths of Revelation (1740)
An Earnest and Serious Answer to Dr Trapp's Sermon on being Righteous Overmuch (1740)
The Spirit of Prayer (1749, 1752)
The Way to Divine Knowledge (1752)
The Spirit of Love (1752, 1754)
A Short but Sufficient Confutation of Dr Warburton's Projected Defence (as he calls it) of Christianity in his Divine Legation of Moses (1757). Reply to The Divine Legation of Moses.
A Series of Letters (1760)
A Dialogue between a Methodist and a Churchman (1760)
An Humble, Earnest and Affectionate Address to the Clergy (1761) renamed "The Power of the Spirit" by Andrew Murray in his 1896 reprint.
You Will Receive Power
The Way to Christ by Jakob Boehme, translated by William Law

Back to **Tracing Universalist Thought Index**